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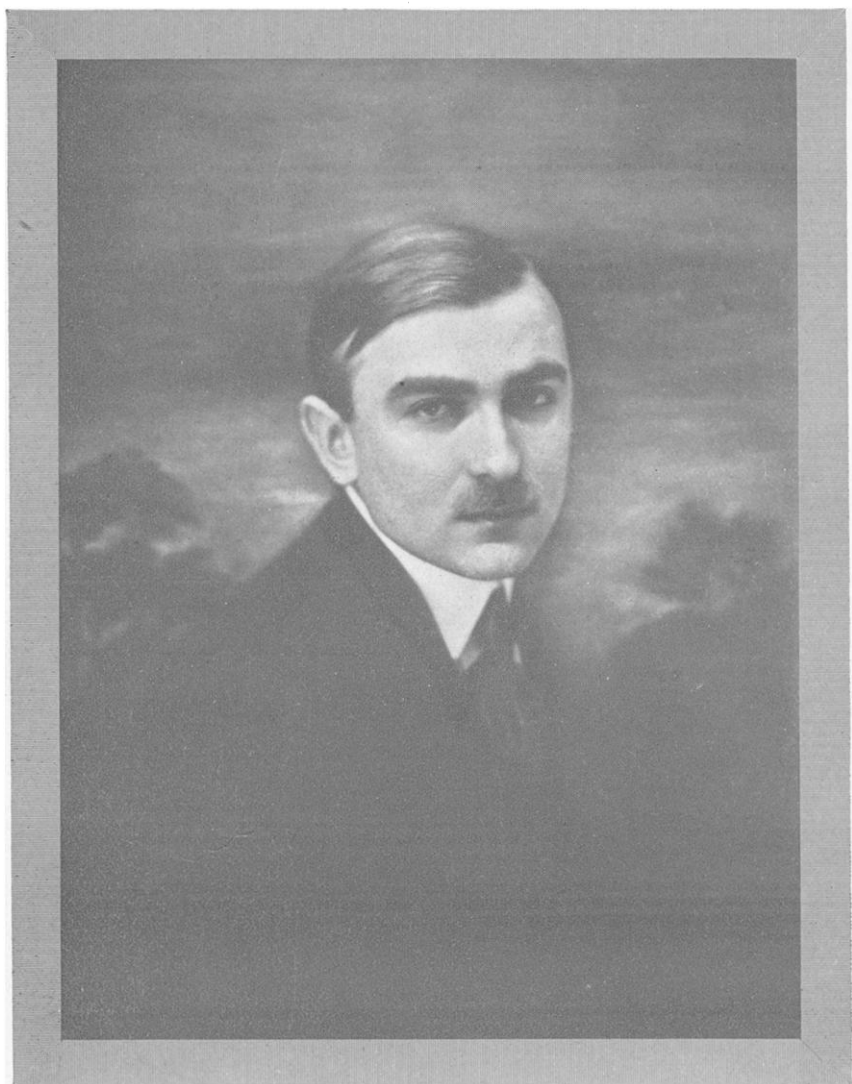
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KAROL SZYMANOWSKI

By ZDZISŁAW JACHIMECKI

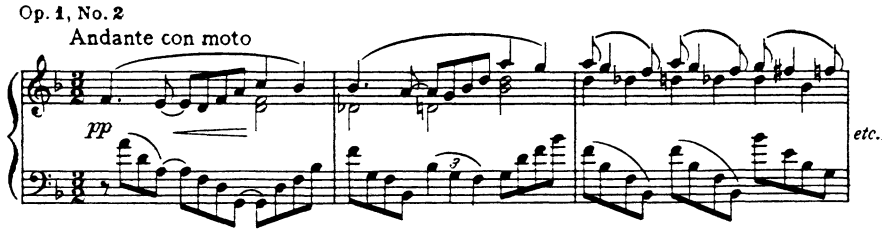
FOREMOST among the musical compositions written in Poland within recent years are the works of Karol Szymanowski. He first appeared before the public as a composer in 1905, but at that time fourteen unpublished works had accumulated in his desk. His productive period, accordingly, runs back about twenty years from the present day. In 1900 our composer began to write his first poems for the piano, without the guidance of a master and unprepared by serious schooling. The young man had grown up in a truly artistic atmosphere in the house of his father, a country gentleman, where none but the best classical and romantic composers were given a hearing. And there, removed from the narrowing influence of any particular school, and in close and continual contact with nature, his mind was formed, like that of Walther von Stoltzing, by the study of the works of the great composers of the past. The great beauties of nature, the broad landscape of his native country, were the inspiration and the background for his first lyric essays. These works were the musical expression of that landscape. Left to himself Szymanowski mastered, unaided, the technical means involved in the utterance of his subtle impressions.

The first piano preludes portrayed with absolute faithfulness the spiritual profile of the youth of eighteen. The nine short pieces of this Opus 1 were written from 1900 to 1902. As we have remarked, the public in Poland first became acquainted with the new talent in 1905. The lyric sincerity of these works, the charmingly poetic ideas, the beauty of melodic invention, the harmonic variety and, finally, the elegance of technique and fineness of form, commanded universal admiration. Scarcely a trace of reminiscence, hardly an echo of another's phrase, appear in this music. It is filled with melancholy and longing. Its habitual mood is sad and tender, but at times it bursts into full flame and becomes dramatic. It is clearly expressive of the highly cultivated spirit of its author and is a true exponent of his personality. While it is thoroughly Polish in its character, it is not always in the popular vein. Since the days of Chopin, Polish music has not



Karol Szymanowski

again reached the high level attained by Szymanowski in his nine Preludes.



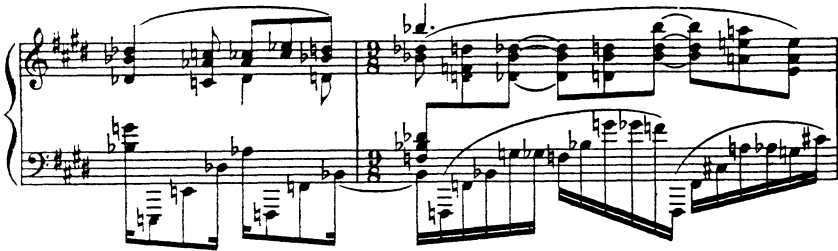
From the very beginning Szymanowski disdained the vulgar. The sonorous qualities of some of his preludes are an evidence of the composer's skill and refinement. There is not one banal idea. The sixth prelude is an early manifestation of the child of this splenetic and decadent century. Extremely complicated in melody and harmony, it stands out among the other preludes with its Tristan chromatics.

After these little piano poems Szymanowski began to write songs. His technique did not yet suffice for larger works. In 1901 and 1902 he wrote his first six songs to verses by Kazimierz Tetmajer. They are not as valuable as the preludes. In the field of instrumental music, Szymanowski's melodic invention was very personal and original. But he could not accommodate it to the human voice. He had not yet solved the mysteries of vocal art, had not mastered its technical problems, its power of expression, its æsthetic significance. Like many German and Russian composers he was unwilling to subject himself to the limitations of the voice. He endeavored to conform his vocal writing to the conditions of abstract musical expression. His first songs have not the individual character of his piano preludes. There is more of intellect than of inspiration in them. Their organic defects are due also to the feeble character of the poetry. Vocal music of this kind is more suitable for private contemplation than for public concert performance.

In 1903 Szymanowski began to devote himself to the regular study of the theory of composition. Zygmunt Noskowski, a Polish composer of note, was his teacher. The result of this schooling soon became evident. The extremely talented pupil began his course with the construction of fugues and variations. He entered upon his studies with a clear perception of the meaning of forms and of logical ideas. Early in this period under Noskowski he wrote the piano fugue in C-sharp minor, which bears no opus

number. In 1909 the composer added a prelude and with this work won a prize in a competition instituted by the Berlin musical journal, "Signale für die musikalische Welt." The fugue subject is quite mature. It shows no trace of the school atmosphere. This fugue appeals to the emotions through its underlying lyric substance. Here excellent counterpoint is wedded to the poetry of music. The prelude, written six years after the fugue, was acknowledged by the judges of the competition as one of the boldest harmonic essays of the times. We look back to-day upon the year 1909 with an indulgent smile, so great, so rapid has been the evolution of ideas on harmony since then. But Szymanowski's prelude will ever remain interesting in its harmonic conception.

Measures 17 and 18 from the Praeludium



The composition of 1903 was the beginning of a series of masterly fugues. We find them in a number of Szymanowski's works. His constructive technique in this form is incomparable.

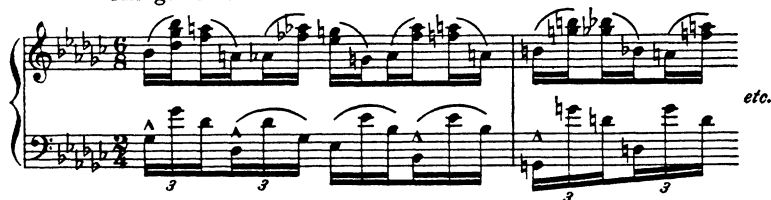
While still under the guidance of Noskowski, Szymanowski wrote his first piano variations, Opus 3, in B-minor. The theme is characteristically Polish. The variations that follow are good examples of the modern style in this musical form. In the first variation the theme retains its original form, but it is hidden in an inner voice under garlands of skillful figuration. In the later variations we can barely perceive the original theme in the general contours of the music and in the rhythmic scheme. The rhythms vary greatly and are often quite emancipated from the basic theme. The element of virtuosity becomes more and more brilliant. The ninth variation is an example of salon music of the highest type. This truly distinguished *Tempo di Valse* shows how easily Szymanowski could have acquired renown as a composer of clever piano pieces, had he followed in the footsteps of Schütt or Chaminade.

Although not a piano virtuoso, Szymanowski mastered thoroughly the secrets of his instrument. He began to transcend the style of Chopin, Liszt and Brahms, at times even ignoring the

physical capabilities of hands and fingers. In some of the studies of Opus 4, especially in the second, which is like a development of Chopin's No. 10 and No. 21, he has presented to the player problems which are not easy of solution.

Op. 4, No. 2

Allegro molto



The third study, B-minor, *in modo d'una canzona*, shows the influence of Scriabine. It was written in 1904. At first this Russian influence is merely sporadic. In fact, up to Opus 15 Szymanowski inclines more to the German style. To it he owed much, both as to the forms and as to the spirit of his works.

Following the three vocal works written in 1904 the development of Szymanowski's talent proceeded gradually and normally. In 1905 he composed his first piano sonata, Opus 8. Five years later this sonata was awarded the first prize in a competition held in connection with a Chopin festival in Lemberg. It is hard to understand that a work so great and so deeply felt should be the exercise of a pupil in composition. Its form and disposition are quite classical, but its content breathes the romantic spirit and rises to full dramatic expression.

The first theme of the Sonata, Op. 8

Allegro moderato



The ideas are clear; the contrasts striking. The second movement is a melodious song for the instrument; the third, a dainty minuet; and the last, a splendid double fugue. The theme of the fugue is clearly connected with the main theme of the first movement, which appears in full in the fugue. This sonata, with its virile frame, throbs with the warmth of young blood and sparkles with color.

For a musical intellect like Szymanowski's it was not difficult to adapt the sonata form to the intimate dialog of music for the chamber and the home. In the same year, 1905, our composer wrote his first sonata for violin and piano, Opus 9. Although less personal in its style than the piano sonata, it is quite mature and has a style of its own. The violin part demands the skill of a virtuoso. Though the composer was not a violin player, his knowledge of the instrument fitted him for great achievements in this field of composition.

Szymanowski's first compositions after the conclusion of this preparatory schooling were the variations for piano on a popular tune, Opus 10, in B-flat. The theme has a melancholy charm, which it brought with it down from the Tatra, the mountains of Poland. In itself it was too short to serve as a theme for variations, and Szymanowski completed it with a few measures of his own. The way in which he sang to its end the melody of the simple Polish mountaineer, Sabata, is marvelous. It is the surpassingly tender answer of a true artist's heart to the soulful fragment of a popular song. The whole work dazzles one with the splendor of the virtuoso. This style of variation, a representative example of the composer's work, exhibits the highest degree of freedom in the treatment of the theme. In their remarkable excellence these variations may be counted among the best modern works in this form, worthy of a place beside those of Brahms and Reger.

In 1905, after a renewed period of song-writing, Szymanowski made his first attempts at orchestral composition. He wrote the Symphonic Overture in E-major, Opus 12. At that time orchestra music in Warsaw was strongly influenced by the works of Richard Strauss. The symphonic poems of the great German master had fascinated all Warsaw, composers and public alike. His admirers outnumbered the adherents of the classical and romantic schools and all the other contemporary European composers together. Szymanowski learned much from the scores of Strauss. He adopted Strauss' orchestral technique and to a certain extent borrowed the spirit of his musical ideas. The sweeping theme of the Overture,



its transformations, the polyphonic web of orchestral voices in this assuredly splendid composition, are such as to warrant our looking

upon them as an imitation of Strauss. A revision to which the composer subjected his score in 1913 made it still more effective. But there could not be much change in the development of ideas nor in their musical quality.

New songs in 1906 continued the progress in the evolution of Szymanowski's art. The five songs of Opus 13 are among his best lyric works. Two of them: *The Christ Child's Lullaby* and *Zuleika*, are to be ranked high in modern song literature. They are distinguished by the beauty of their melodies and their colorful accompaniments. The melodic line is quite original. From this period onward Szymanowski devoted much attention to song writing, but whithersoever his Muse may have led him, we shall always look upon these two songs as the classic instances of his lyric inspiration. We might even go so far as to pronounce them the classic songs of our age.

In 1906, when the composer lived for a longer period in Berlin, we may observe the first revolution in Szymanowski's matured style. At that time he wrote his first symphony, Opus 15, a complicated and over-elaborated work. This was followed by twelve songs, Opus 17. In the vocal compositions the young

Op. 17, No. 1, measures 16 and 17

Fünk - - chen dort o - ben fern hin - auf

composer showed his willingness to reach the utmost limit in the heaping up of dissonances. He outdid all the experiments of his contemporaries. Wagner, Hugo Wolf, Richard Strauss, Reger, Debussy, even Scriabine and Schönberg, who at that time were, comparatively speaking, quite modest in their use of dissonances, were surpassed in these songs of Szymanowski's. Personally I believe that the principles of true art and the true conception of the song form are violated in this style of vocal writing, in which the voice must force its way through the thorny brush of dissonances,

and instead of presenting a really beautiful and expressive melodic outline, gives us merely a painful contortion of melody. Perhaps future generations will not bear me out in this opinion, but at present there are few singers who manifest any inclination to sing Szymanowski's Opus 17. The vocalist's instinct does not lead him to thrust upon the public works which seem unnatural.

In two instances in this collection Szymanowski overcame his desire to overwhelm his hearers with the shock of dissonances, which is the most marked characteristic of their style. In these cases the desire to astound made way for true lyric inspiration. They are the songs: *Annunciation* and *Love Night*. *Annunciation* enchants us with its thematic work and its fire of expression. Tense nervous excitement pervades the erotic atmosphere of *Love Night*. These two songs weigh even in the balance with the other ten of the collection.

After *Penthesilea* (1907-1910), a short, incomparably delicate and well rounded composition for voice with orchestra on a text by Wyspiański, Szymanowski rose to the climax of musical inspiration in 1909-1910 with his second symphony for a large orchestra, Opus 19, in B-major. Without exaggeration we may pronounce this magnificent work the finest flower in the field of symphonic music in its day. After the few years which have elapsed since then, this is very clearly to be seen.

The fate of pure symphonic music after Brahms (whose symphonies were posthumous children of the classical style), Bruckner, and Tschaikowsky with his masterpiece, the Sixth Symphony, clearly foretold the end of this form. Strauss wrote program music only. His symphonic poems do not belong in the class of pure symphony. Mahler, after his second symphony, did not publish the programs of his later colossal productions, although these programs were integral parts of the works; and he went over more and more to the form of the cantata. In 1910 accordingly, the way into the temple of the symphony lay quite unobstructed and it was open to anyone to seek to win laurels as a successor of Beethoven, Brahms, Bruckner and Tschaikowsky.

One needed merely a spark of genius to utter to the world thoughts that were new, great and beautiful, in a medium apparently exhausted. Szymanowski's second symphony disclosed the genius of its author in all the majesty of a real masterpiece. The modern musical world was at last enriched by a work which was exceptional in its melodic flights, in its immaculate purity, in the holiness, as it were, of its episodes. The crowning glory of the

work is the theme with variations in the second movement, the creation of a marvelous sweep of inspiration. No commentary, however detailed, would suffice to convey its whole emotional content.

In the first movement Szymanowski preserved the classical form. It would be difficult to find a stronger contrast than that existing between the first and second themes. The first has an ineffable charm, light as the breath of Spring—a delicate violin solo accompanied by several other instruments.

The beginning of the first theme
Allegro moderato grazioso



In its very beginning this symphony is unusual both in its orchestral color and in its lyric poetry. In expression the second theme is directly the reverse of the first, steeped in the depths of melancholy musing. The later movements of the symphony are disposed strictly according to the classical sonata form. They include a series of variations and end with a fugue on five subjects, rising proudly like a magnificent Gothic cathedral tower over this great structure. A mysteriously beautiful theme with variations introduces this musical poem.

Lento dolce (The theme of the variations)

Two staves of music in 4/4 time, key of B-flat major. The first staff is a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. It begins with a piano (pp) dynamic. The melody in the treble clef starts with a half note B-flat, followed by a half note D, then a half note E-flat. The bass clef accompaniment consists of a steady eighth-note pattern. The second staff continues the melody with a piano (p) dynamic, featuring a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, including B-flat, A, G, F, E-flat, D, C, and B-flat, ending with a half note A.



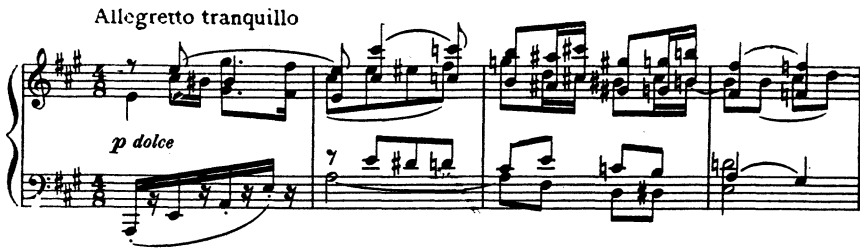
It has no programmatic significance, but it is filled with characteristic ideas and forcible contrasts—a masterpiece in every respect!

Immediately after this work Szymanowski wrote his second piano sonata, Opus 21, in A-major. Like the symphony it is in the classical form. This work also stands in the first rank among modern piano compositions. None but Szymanowski could so well adapt the old principles of form to new æsthetic ideas and to the needs of the day. If Beethoven had written a piano sonata in 1910, he would have written it in the same way. The influence of the mighty classic master is evident throughout the work. It has a depth and a majesty of idea which bear comparison with the style of the immortal genius. And they can be compared with nothing else. There is in this work something of eternal beauty, and although it is intensely modern in spirit and in its material, it reflects none of the conventions in vogue in 1910. A great personality speaks in every measure of the sonata. It is evident in the magnificent first theme of the first movement as well as in the lyric poetry of the second,

Quasi andante (The second theme)



in the dainty tracery of the theme of the variations,



in the pathos of the Sarabanda, and finally in the variation which precedes the introduction to the fugue. In this final variation the composer offers up what is perhaps the profoundest sacrificial gift to divine inspiration which we could name in our generation. Such wonderful burnt-offerings of heart and soul can come only from the greatest creative talents. And I consider Szymanowski such a talent.

The year 1910 was the period of lowest ebb in Szymanowski's productive activity. Still it witnessed the creation of one of his most valuable works. This is the Romance for violin and piano, Opus 23. This composition, overflowing with the noblest poetry, is unique in the intensity of its fervor of love. I can think of no other contemporary work which burns with such fire and is so lofty in its musical conception. Here the form coincides with the content. Its melody is characterised by extreme beauty, its harmony by richness and sonority.

In comparison with those of Opus 17 the *Songs of Many Colors*, Opus 22, show a marked clarification in Szymanowski's vocal style. Each has a characteristic melodic outline of its own and a characteristic accompaniment. Here, once more, the composer finds his own atmosphere, and easily discovers a distinctly musical garb for the poems.

Shortly after this, in 1911, Szymanowski wrote six songs, Opus 24, to poems by the Persian, Hafiz. What a difference between these and the songs which immediately preceded them. The songs of Opus 22 are more descriptive. They are what we might imagine to be the musical expression of Dionysiac intoxication. In Opus 24 the music changes, if we may use the figure, into the smile of the rose in which the Persian poet first saw his beloved. It is the fever which torments the poet, unhappy in his love. It breathes the melancholy of the tomb. The unparalleled subtlety of every motive in the voice and in the accompaniment, places these songs among the finest in modern vocal music.

In 1912-1913 Szymanowski wrote his first opera, *Hagith*, to a libretto by Felix Dörmann. The author of the libretto has gone the way which in two instances led Richard Strauss to operatic triumphs. Dörmann's verses are as perverse as those of *Salome* or *Electra*, and also as compact. One act of the opera also resembles *Salome* and *Electra*. The story of *Hagith* is fantastic and of drastic power; it will be very effective on the stage.

An oriental king in ancient times, like another Faust, regains his youth, to live and to rule with renewed vigor. This renewal of youth is to win for him Hagith, a beautiful maid who loves the King's son. The high priest pronounces the words of an oracle: "If Hagith resists the King's will, she shall be stoned to death." Hagith refuses to yield, preferring death in her love for the Prince; for it is his happiness and his power on the throne that she desires even more than the preservation of her own young life sacrificed to the old tyrant.

The old King attempts to resort to violence in possessing himself of Hagith and of her youth, for upon this possession is contingent his own lasting rejuvenescence. But at the moment when his desire is about to be accomplished, he falls dead.

Hagith is to suffer the supreme penalty. She is beyond hope of rescue, for the King, jealous of the Prince's power and influence, has removed him from the capital. The priests lead Hagith to her execution and she dies with a song of love on her lips. The news of the King's death has overtaken the Prince on his journey. He hurries back to save his beloved, but alas! he arrives too late. Hagith is dead.

This very interesting composition has not yet been performed on any stage, but the vocal score has recently been published, and we can form some estimate of the work. I have had an opportunity also to study a few pages of the orchestra score. Like the librettist, the composer has succumbed to the influence of Richard Strauss. The musical style of *Hagith* is a development of the dramatic expression of *Electra*. We cannot here go into the question of reminiscences, but we may be sure that without *Electra*, *Hagith*, as we know the opera, could not have been written. Its style would have been quite different. Szymanowski confides the chief task to the orchestra. Its part is rich in texture and the instruments are made to yield their utmost in effect. Dissonance prevails almost without interruption throughout the work. The human voices move in the most difficult intervals, for the most part in glaring contrariety to the harmonies of the orchestra. It is to be expected that in actual performance they will often be submerged in the storm of orchestral tone. Audiences will hardly derive real æsthetic satisfaction from this opera; for this satisfaction depends in the first place on the beauty of the musical

idea, and after this on the realistic truth of musico-dramatic expression. Now, in this opera, the finale only is likely to afford true delight to the hearers, with its melodic charm and the celestial sound of its massed voices and orchestra. It is Hagith, who, on her way to the place of the stoning, sings her last song of love and sacrifice, while the commiserating chorus supports her song with a wonderful accompaniment. The whole finale is bathed in a light of the highest beauty.

Hagith does not mark the last step in the evolution of Szymanowski's musical style. The opera is merely a turning point in his art. He kept intensifying the means of emotional expression in his successive works and finally reached a stage of hypersensitiveness in which even the most subtle harmonies and chromatic progressions, founded on the æsthetic principles of consonance and dissonance, no longer sufficed him. And so, in 1914, we find him in the ranks of those composers who, having discarded the old theory of tonality, turned away entirely from consonance, and arrived thus at a new system of harmony, which in their opinion is much more perfect than the old system. However that may be, the new system is at present a veritable chaos. It may lead to the adoption of the quarter-tone scale to which some of these composers seem inclined. How soon this end will be attained it is impossible to foresee. Before it can be reached it will be necessary to change the construction of many of our musical instruments and to accustom vocalists to singing in this scale, which is, as yet, hardly more than a dream.

With the year 1914 Szymanowski joined the party of Stravinski, Busoni, Schönberg, Ravel, Malipiero and the rest. In this group also, his ingenuity, his striking personality, place him in the first rank. But he is too much of a true musician to fall into the musical futurism of a Malipiero, or into the musical "dadaism" of some of the piano pieces of Schönberg and others.

Up to 1914 Szymanowski's music was lyrical in character. It was a tonal analogy of lyric poetry. The descriptive qualities were a secondary consideration. His instrumental works had a universal appeal. They obtruded no fad, no special feature upon the audience. Gradually Szymanowski went over into the field of descriptive music. This new phase of his art, now six or seven years old, is marked by a wealth of ideas about tone color and tone painting as great as the wealth of ideas connected with tone poetry which characterises his earlier art.

The works written by Szymanowski during the period of the world war number seventeen. Among them are a *Third Symphony*

with chorus and tenor solo, *The Song of the Night*, Opus 27 (a kind of cantata after the manner of some of Mahler's symphonies); a *Violin Concerto*, Opus 35; a larger work for alto solo, female chorus and orchestra entitled *Demeter*, Opus 38; *Agave*, Opus 41, a cantata for soprano solo, chorus and orchestra; a second set of *Hafiz Songs*, Opus 26. These compositions are still in manuscript and have not yet been performed.

Among the remaining works (most of them still unpublished) the compositions for the violin are most important. We have heard some concert performances of a *Notturmo and Tarantella*, Opus 28; *Myths*, Opus 30 (*The Fountains of Arethusa, Narcissus, Pan and the Dryads*); transcriptions of *Caprices* by Paganini, Opus 40. The technique of these works opens up new paths in this field of composition. Well acquainted with a famous violin virtuoso near whom he lived, Szymanowski picked up all the secrets of technique, often the result of an improvised exercise, of an involuntary movement of the fingers or of an unintentioned gliding of the bow. These factors Szymanowski elaborated into a marvelous system, incomparably richer than the whole school of virtuosity, as we knew it hitherto. The most brilliant effects in Paganini's concertos and caprices are left far behind. We can say of this Szymanowski technique, in itself an evidence of creative genius, that it transcends by far the dreams of the best violin virtuosos of our times. Its effects are founded on the most fantastic harmonics, an inexhaustible variety of spiccatos, of chords and double stoppings, a truly resplendent palette of color.

These compositions contribute unlimited artistic values to the literature of modern music. As an artist Szymanowski can be compared with Debussy only, although the musical substance of his work differs greatly from that of Debussy.

The absolutely revolutionary character of Szymanowski's later compositions does not prevent him from making them excellent examples of musical form. Much of this work appears to the reader of the manuscript like the veriest tangle of dissonances, productive only of absolute cacophony. But what a surprise awaits the curious reader when he hears the actual performance, especially if the players be at some distance from the auditor. His impression is of a kind unknown to him until now. These compositions are playable by eminent violinists only. It would be a sacrilege for an inexperienced amateur to venture upon their performance. For this reason they should remain in manuscript, as was the custom in days gone by, and should be reserved for the hands of artists of surpassing worth.

Szymanowski's latest works are most difficult to understand. They involve elements quite new to our ears. The musical phrase is made up of little particles, like a mosaic; the melody is entirely unconventional; the harmony is a continuous whirlpool of modulation and dissonance.

From "Sérénade de Don Juan"



It is to be regretted that the author of this essay has only a reading acquaintance with Szymanowski's later works for the piano. The composer himself is not a piano virtuoso and cannot interpret them as they should be rendered.

The published works: *Masques* (*Scheherezade*, *Tantris le Bouffon*, *Sérénade de Don Juan*), Opus 34, and the *Third piano sonata*, Opus 36,

Sonata III

Presto



may lead to a misunderstanding of Szymanowski's new piano style. A conscientious analysis of the works is of little aid here. To acquire objective certainty that this music does not mean a return to chaos we should have to hear a rendition which would correspond exactly to the tonal concepts in the mind of the composer as he wrote. We can recognize the form of the third piano

sonata in spite of the difficulty in discerning the contrasting themes. And this form reminds us of the classical scheme. The great fugue with which the sonata ends is a resonant apotheosis of the revolution in art which initiates this new epoch in the history of music.

The later vocal works: *The Songs of the Prince's Daughter in the Fairy Tale*, Opus 31 and *The Songs of the Mad Muezzin*, Opus 42, approach in style the last instrumental works. Some of them incline to virtuoso colorature, justified by the context of the poems. The music, in keeping with the words, has an oriental coloring.

Szymanowski's whole creative work presents itself as an uninterrupted evolution of technical means and emotional content. Like a second Parsifal, Szymanowski wends his way toward Monsalvat, toward the ideal in art, seeking the way which leads to perfect beauty. And if ideals in art are ever attainable, Szymanowski has reached them in some of his works and will reach them again in others.

Among the virtuosos who have done most to spread Szymanowski's fame are the singer Stanislaw Szymanowska-Bartoszewicz (the composer's sister), the orchestra conductor Gregor Fitelberg, the pianists Arthur Rubinstein, Harry Neuhaus and Jascha Dubianski, and the violinist Paul Kochanski.

Many of Szymanowski's compositions have been published in the Universal Edition of Vienna, others by Piwarski in Cracow.

(Translated by O. T. Kindler.)